

# THE AESTHETICS OF ALIENATION IN MODERN NIGERIAN DRAMA: A MARXIST READING OF OBAFEMI'S *SUICIDE SYNDROME*

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## Abstract

Nigeria has witnessed a steady development in modern drama consciousness and practice. As Johnson (2001) accurately opines, this is self-evident in the plethora of published and unpublished dramatic works that presently adumbrate the literary, dramatic and theatrical landscape of the country, and also in the innumerable stage, radio, television and video productions of these and other play scripts and dramatic creations by professionals, academic and amateur groups.

Apparently, of all the various academics who are among the practising and accomplished playwrights in Nigeria are the likes of Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan and Zulu Sofola. However, while it is possible to proudly boast of an avalanche of extensive critical studies as enduring reactions to the canon of dramatic literature that has evolved from the more elderly and more popular practitioners like Soyinka and his contemporaries, mentioned above, virtually almost nothing is available on the generation of the younger playwrights like Yerima and Obafemi. Interestingly, the generation of the younger playwrights though, are less popular among the critics of dramatic literature home and abroad they are more famous as Marxist writers whose aesthetic standpoints evince the alienation between the *haves* and the *have nots* of the society. It is against this background that this paper explores the Marxist's critical position in the assessment of the Nigerian

theatrical topography that features this generation of playwrights represented by Obafemi. As Taine has identified, literature is the product of three interfusing factors of moment, race and milieu. To these factors, Marx and Engel were to add the "economic" factor which completes the continuum and literature has since then been viewed, along politics, religion, and philosophy as the superstructure of human activities. If we concern ourselves with the explanation of the economic factor, discovery is made that there is a new sense of awareness in Nigerian theatre. This awareness has resulted in what Gbilekaa tags the theatre of radical poetics which is what explains the dramatic topographies of most of the post-Civil War playwrights whose commitment is nothing but the exposition of the alienation tendencies that typifies the relationship between the bourgeois and the proletariat.

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Fashina (1993:1) posits that the state of being which is linguistically signified as alienation is “a human experience that is as old as man himself” and the phenomenon seems to feature constantly in man’s various endeavours. This fact is true of the African ritualistic setting where it is possible to separate the fetish priests from the ordinary followers in a ritualistic dramatic instance. Hence, there is that instance of mutually opposing forces as perceivable in the relationship between the adjacent forces of the priesthood and followers. For instance, in a situation where there is binary opposition between the bourgeois priesthood and the common followers, alienation exists. As such, within the composition of the ritual African drama, the grouping – priesthood and neophyte – which in Yoruba term explains the “awo” and “ogberi”, is bound to elicit certain traits of difference and the Marxian theory which recognizes social clash may interpret the situation better.

Marxist criticism is a product of political economic reasoning popularized by Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels. According to Ngara, Marxism “is not just an alternative technique for interpreting *Paradise Lost*... It is part of our liberation from oppression, and that is why it is worth discussing at book length” (1987:7). Oppression as a phenomenon is

measured via social statuses and an evaluation of literature from the angle will impose the common Marxian premise that “literature can only be properly understood within a larger framework of social reality” on a drama critic (Forgas, 1985:135). The understanding of the social reality itself is based on the societal stratification which has made it unavoidable for “...all culture, all literature and art [to] belong to definite classes and...geared to definite political live” (Mao Tse Tsung, cited in Ngara 1987:31).

Fortunately, poverty and exploitation which are the themes of this research have established links in the Marxist’s idea of the alienation that exists between the “haves” and the “have nots”. Invariably, Marxism provides the critique and explanations of the structure of power and privileged relationship in a capitalist state. For instance, the Marxists discovered, that apart from the stratification of the society into two – bourgeois and proletariat – the capitalistic human society operates what is different from the old ties of obligation with an individual’s pursuit of self interest and capital accumulation and consequently as Buah educates us,

countries are organized in different ways politically and economically...

Capitalist countries are concerned with protecting individual rights, particularly the right of individuals to own private property of various kinds (1978:122).

It is, no doubt, the violent drive towards individual capital standing that is responsible for what Marx himself identified as the “continual conflict” between the two main classes of the society. These two classes include, according to Buah, “the people who own the means of production, and the people who provide the labour” (1978:125). Buah provides the explanation of the communal conflict when he further explicates that:

although in the minority, the people who owned everything needed men for their livelihood had always played the role of masters. The other class of people, who formed the bulk of the world’s population, had nothing which they could call their own. Their lot had always been to work for their masters, and to remain poor, earning just enough to keep bone and flesh together. In ancient times, they were the slaves; in the Middle Ages, they were the serfs; and in the modern capitalist countries, they were the wage-earners, often called the working class. In advanced books, they are often

referred to as the proletariat, which comes from *proles*, a Latin word meaning ‘children’ (125).

Basically therefore, the continual conflict between the two classes lies in the interest of the bourgeois to perpetually emasculate the proletariat and reduce them to mere slaves who do not have any say the social decisions.

### **Marxism, Drama and the Nigerian Dramatists**

A study of most published Nigerian plays reveals their thematic contexts as those which bear a heavy burden of reflecting the dichotomy between the “haves” and the “have nots”. As a result of this, the palpable gulf between the rich and the poor, upper and lower classes, is noticeable in plays like Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, *Hopes of The Living Deads* and *If... A Tragedy of the Ruled*. Though Soyinka’s commitment to scapegoatism is discernable in *The Strong Breed*, evident in the play is the confirmation of what the Marxists call the manipulation of the proletariat by the bourgeois. At least, we know this in the village council’s choice of Ifada as a scape-goat.

In Rotimi’s *Hopes of the Living Dead* the downtrodden lepers who constitute the “have nots” give credibility to the author’s commitment to social alienation as his lepers are simply regarded as socio-economic aliens to their environment. Osofisan lends credibility to this when he gives insight to what the Nigerian playwrights do.

It is only with this understanding – that is, by inscribing our plays with this pace of surreptitious insurrections – that the outsider can fully interpret the repertory of the contemporary Nigerian stage and appreciate our predicament. Plays like Rotimi’s *If* and *Hopes of the Living Dead*, Sowande’s *Cirus of Freedom Road*, Obafemi’s *Nights of the Mystical Beast*, Segun Oyekunle’s *Katakata for Sufferhead*, Okediji’s *Rere Run*, Soyinka’s *Jero’s Metamorphosis*, *Opera Wonyosi* or *The Bacchae of Euripides* and virtually all of my own works, especially such pieces as *Once Upon Four Robbers*, *Another Raft*, *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* and *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* are intended to be as much investigative rites of socio-political rebellion as they are deliberate revisions of the inherited theatrical forms on behalf of that hidden agenda (1998:83).

It is thus apt to agree with Asein that:

the theme of alienation and exile is one of the most persistent themes in the literature of the black world. It features prominently in the works of many black writers who at one time or the other have had to yield to socio-political circumstances prevailing in their countries: or choose to undertake an epic journey in search of their ancestral roots (1982:125).

The first of Asein's options seems to explain the commitment of African dramatists as they exhibit the penchant for the humanistic mission endeared to "the development of human personality, human values, emotions, communication and relations, equity, justice, fair play and other humanistic ethics and ethos" (Uji 2004:6). This definitely allows us to reason along with Totov that human societies do not

take shape by themselves: they expose definite interest of people in a society into classes...they express the interest of particular classes. These interests are in the long run, rooted in the sphere of material production and people's material needs (1985:17).

This will no doubt lead us to the socio-political consciousness of the intratext which seems to evince what Gbileeka tags "the coercive machinery which the colonial powers set up [which] propelled a protest tradition in the theatrical idiom which ultimately paved the way for the development of a radical theatrical tradition..." (2001:11). Little wonder then that Nigerian theatrical experiences are more aligned to politics and the alienating effect of bad leadership.

From its inception, the Nigerian drama has always been an avenue through which people weigh the performance of the ruling class. It has since remained a tool for appraising or condemning the class. It is also a means of mobilizing the people to support or reject a particular government. Theatre practitioners have refused to bulge in their antagonistic reactions to unsavoury political realities. They continue to respond to their immediate socio-political environments which have experienced instabilities that have often truncated the people's dream. Ngugi makes this clear in *Home Coming* when he pinpointedly posits:

A writer responds, with his total personality to a social environment which changes all the time. Using a kind of a sensible needle, he registers with

varying degrees of accuracy and success, the *conflicts* and tensions in his changing society (Italics mine) (p. 1).

Ngugi's choice of "conflict" is a reinstatement of the Marxist "continual conflict" already mentioned as the inevitable conduit for the clash of classes.

The Marxist's idea of utopianism is the "welfare state" which, according to Buah, must maintain "a wide range of social services" for all its citizens. This model provides a dichotomy between two categories of people: the people who own the means of production and those who provide labour. The members of the former are the masters while those of the latter are the servants. These servants, who are in most cases the protagonists of the Nigerian drama are the poor people who are only to "work for their master, and to remain [perpetually] poor, earning just enough to keep bone and flesh together" (Buah 1978:125).

It is understandable why the theatrical activities of the like of Hubert Ogunde, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, John Pepper Clark, Femi Osofisan, Zulu Sofola, Kola Ogunmola and others like Olu Obafemi developed their plays along the kind of Marxist temper. Our contact with these Nigerian playwrights is based on their presentation of the complex and hybridized society that characterizes the neo-colonial African setting.

Obafemi's plays fulfil de Graft's maxim of the utilization of socio-political facts as pulsating raw materials by being presentational instances of the separatist temper of a Marxist. As we shall later discover, through the selected plays, Obafemi's interpretation of the theatre seems to align with Adepitan's (2002:105) summary that "the purpose of the theatre is to impact experience, not to provide 'meaning' or 'moral' to set a riddle, not to tell a story". In the light of the foregoing, it may be rewarding to outline, albeit in passing, Olu Obafemi's personality to provide further insights into his aesthetics and the dialectical relationship between it and his ideology.

*Suicide Syndrome* is an engaging play in which Olu Obafemi keeps his audience laughing and weeping. However in his review of the premiere performance of the play in The University of Ilorin Niyi Osundare had warned: "Do not expect to laugh so much that you forget your woes. Do not cry either. Tears are useless now. They screen off the truth of sight" (1986:1425). From the review, Osundare informs us that Obafemi leaves us with mixed feelings as he "kept us laughing and thinking" throughout the play. In the author's note, Obafemi accepts:

I do not conceive *Suicide Syndrome* as a play about suicide at all. If anything, it is a rabid exposure of the symptoms of suicide, the cause; that is, neo-colonial and socio-economic order in Nigeria and other ‘third world’ nations. It is a proposition of the options available to the working people, the peasantry, the unemployed but unemployable majority in these neo-colonies.

This invariably reveals that Obafemi set out to exteriorize what he calls “deprivation and absurdities that afflict the have-nots” in the Nigerian society where there appears to be that economic imbalance.

Interestingly, the play begins as a protest against the Eurocentric symphonized theatrical form which beclouds the African realities of hazards and impoverishments. This explains why Killam and Rowe state clearly that

the dominant voice in *Suicide Syndrome* is that of an ideologue-artist who manoeuvres character and actions, songs and dance to amplify class sympathy (2000:192).

The play starts as a group of people marches into the theatre where a play is about to end, with irascible countenances demanding a more realistic drama which truly reflects the harsh realities of their embattled existence. The protesters in this group reject as a true African drama, that escapist theatrical form whose focus is on the rich and powerful people and their supposed decent mannerisms. According to Osundare,

They banished the clowning couple from their stage, and instantly start to put their own play together (1986:1425).

In the newly-staged play Obafemi presents two opposing economic levels in the impoverished and starving family of MAMA and the affluence of the likes of ALHAJI, a stark illiterate who has just celebrated his third billion naira, and MINISTER who serves as his mate. Obviously tension is created by the contrast between the trio of MAMA, SON and DAUGHTER on one side and ALHAJI, MINISTER and PROFESSOR on the other. Obafemi consequently presents two opposing worlds with two distinct interests as typified by OLD DIRECTOR and NEW DIRECTOR respectively. For instance, Old Director who represents the bourgeois rationalizes the need for the symphonized escapist theatre form:

Please be fair. We need relief from our daily anxieties of the modern world. We need dreams about our unattained and unattainable aspirations. We need a break from our sordid material want. Haba! We need amusement in the delicate cosmopolitan life (109).

This ideology seems unrealistic to NEW DIRECTOR as he interjects

Do we amuse overfed stomachs with fantasies or unfed-ones? Eh, with plays which make man a jelly before his real life (109).

By staging a fresh play to up-turn the escapist romanticist drama of the bourgeoisie, according to NEW DIRECTOR,

we...want to show them our own side of the story. We'll give you a master. A play about workers, 'the disposed peasants and the unemployed.'

*Suicide Syndrome* shows a lot of ideological commitment towards the sympathetic portrayal of the have-nots of the society. Long before the publication of the play, Obafemi had written that dramatists generally are expected to

deal with urgent, particular, topical, contemporary social problems with the aim of raising popular awareness of a positive revolutionary alternative to the present social malaise (1981:17)

With this, one is not in doubt as to what Obafemi sets to achieve as his goal. Little wonder Osofisan ranks Obafemi high among the budding Nigerian playwrights because of his radical ideological inclination, saying he is "a member of us the younger generation" of writers who share that leftist ideology and "essential social learning and convictions [which] separate us from the older writers by a wide margin..." (1978:18).

*Suicide Syndrome* is divided into moments and in six moments the story is successfully dramatized how the majority in the Third World society is relegated to live in perpetual hardship. It is in the face of this hardship that people degenerate into many despicable levels of reality as enumerated by NEW DIRECTOR:

A man hanging

A woman crashing under the burden of existence

Men maimed and mangled

Men physically disabled and mentally disparaged roam the streets;



People turning to *Kainkain* (local gin) or to cocaine,

People restituting themselves

People robbing

People killing

People deceiving others and deceiving themselves

People uncaring

That is reality. The suicide syndrome.

Here, the totality of the reality of a Nigeria society is summarized. Hence, the tendency of suicide in the societal scenario lies in the people's self-assassination of the respectable personalities replaced by the disreputable selves. For instance, people rob, kill and deceive others, as enumerated by DIRECTOR, because they have to survive in a capitalist society where the only order is possible through the dictates of Naira. This is further substantiated by the authorial interjection into the stage direction:

Ba-bu kudi                      Not to have money

Ba - bu duniyan              Is not to have audience

(In Yoruba)

Ti ko ba sowo

Ko ni seniyan

Me jalai looo (p112).

It is lack of money, probably caused by her husband's financial incapacitations, that pushes MAMA to that hazardous position of a mother in an impoverished family. An embarrassing situation is subtly captured in the following except from the play to enable a focus through Obafemi's lenses.

MAMA:              Eat your gari, for God's sake. Your father is trying his best you know. He took this gari on credit so that we can survive the afternoon. Eat your...

SON: *(Sharply cutting in)* Yes, he tries. He always tries. But I am hungry all the same.

MAMA: Don't be unfair.

SON: *(Still turning the gari in the bowl, with visible discomfort).* Fairness. It cannot fill my stomach *(looks up to the mother)*. I am hungry.

MAMA: *(Trying a maternal defence).* It took him great pains to get the gari on credit you know. One Mudu, and plenty of insult from the bitch at the market. For God's sake... Eat, for the sake of your father.

SON: *(Grunts).* A loan of a mudu of Gari from the market.

MAMA: *(Trying more persuasion).* But your father works hard, you know. *(Moving closer to him).* You saw his hands when he got back from work yesterday *(Now she passionately appeals to his emotions)*. Bruised, cracked and hard; rock-hard like the monkey's buttocks.

SON: *(Sullen, quiet for a while. Then looks up to his mother)* Yes, I know. Father works. Cracked, broken, used, dog-tired. But we are hungry all the same Mama. Why?

MAMA: Is it your father's fault that he gets little money for doing so much work? (113-114)

The answer to MAMA's questions lies in what we have initially stressed about the employer's desire to always exploit the employee in the Third World. This exploitative tendency is often surreptitiously covered-up by bourgeois subterfuge. An instance of this is clear in the beginning of the play where a piece that does not truly represent the society is put in the theatre. To resolve the crisis Obafemi experiments what Augusto Boal calls "the poetics of the oppressed" in which:

the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic actions, tries out solutions, discusses places for change – in short, trains himself for real action. (1979:122).

In a flash, Obafemi's poetics of the oppressed replaces the cast with that which intends to expose the "Alhajis, Professors and Contractors" who are "agents of our common undoing" (110).

This type of aesthetic ideals, according to Checkov "are realistic and they describe life as it is" (Victin, 1955:192). It is this aesthetics that identifies the plights of the suffering masses like UNEMPLOYED GRADUATE, WORKER, MAMA, SON, *et cetera*, and brings them to the fore. As the play progresses, the radical temper of the youth in SON and DAUGHTER keeps protesting with mind-bugging questions.

Yes Mama, tell us. Why do the children of people over there, the minister, and the Alhaji come to school in their posh cars, each with a driver while we go to school without shoes on? Why can't we have provisions at school and avoid the wretched school food like others? (115)

MAMA finds these questions unanswerable and because she has resigned to fate, she resolves to forcefully silence her children:

Now shut up and listen. You are different (115)

As evident in *Suicide Syndrome*, Obafemi's histrionic camp is ineluctably pitched on the side of the oppressed masses with a clear demand for the transformation of the status quo. His poetics has created dramas that

project the class struggle in society and he seems to have a strong belief in collectivism (as opposed to bourgeois individualism, especially) as a cardinal principle in society's progress (Uji 2001:46).

by exposing the economic travails of the people, as reflected in the attributes of his numerous characters in *Suicide Syndrome*, Obafemi ranks among the "New Brechtian dramatists" who

are class-oriented, change demanding, socially conscious. Theirs is a criticism that tries to speak to, after first learning from the dynamic working classes, a criticism which embraces combative realism without giving up

what can be learned from modernism, a criticism which discovers the causal complexes of African society and which unmasks the prevailing view of things as the view of those in power who are the functionaries of superpowers. Their poetics is truly internationalist Third World poetics. And it sees nationalism and ethnicity as what they are; transitions on the way to the aesthetics of the future: ethics (Gugelberger 1976:15).

Therefore, what Obafemi does as a new Brechtian in *Suicide Syndrome* is to set up an agenda with a vivid partisan motive, which is highly coated in anti-materialistic dialectics, for his downtrodden characters who have identified the source of their woes in the bourgeoisie manipulation of the society.

While the likes of MAMA and the members of her family only manage to survive, ALHAJI has good money (₦500,000:00) to throw at his mistress. In showing this, Obafemi has successfully articulated the problem in most Third World countries where extreme capitalism is the order of the day. Therefore, the playwright's antagonistic stance in *Suicide Syndrome* is to register his protest against the corruption, sycophancy and thoughtless exhibition of wealth by the bourgeois class.

As Gbilekaa tells us, since the Civil War in Nigeria, a new sense of awareness seems to be flowing within the veins of the new generation of Nigeria playwrights comprising Osofisan, Sowande, Omotosho as well as Obafemi. This is decidedly so because, to quote Ngugi (1982:47);

A writer responds, with his total personality to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of a sensible needle, he registers with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society.

*Suicide Syndrome* is no doubt a 'register' of the 'conflicts' and 'tension' in the Nigerian society. Obviously as already expressed, there is that conflict between the impoverish mode of life of MAMA and her family; and the ostentatious and exhibitionist life style of ALHAJI and his like.

We conclude this essay on the note of stressing that radicalism in Nigerian dramaturgical art is a product of socio-economic development in an independent Nigeria. Though radical drama started as a reaction against colonial domination in the works of the

likes of Ngugi and Soyinka, a pugnacious mental condition evolved out of the neo-colonial schism that characterizes the independent Africa. This mental condition became even more volatile as evident in the works of the playwrights of Obafemi's generation. This is because of the vision-lacking manner with which the ruling elites conducted the affairs of the new African nation. Evidently the conducts of such leaders come under perpetual ridicule of the African playwrights who either produce plays that manifest as socio-political satires that challenge, according to Gbilekaa "corruption and oppression, but above all, advocate for a socialist society" (2000:22).

It is this volatile radicalism, as opposed to the subtle radicalism of the first generation playwrights, which is the major dividing line between the likes of Obafemi, who are the new apostles of change and their predecessors. It is therefore unambiguous that in *Suicide Syndrome* Obafemi's commitment seeks to re-orientate the audience that Nigeria's advocacy for independence was a self-destructive mission; because rather than developing the nation, the independence has become a catalyst that quickens its demise. Hence, to Obafemi, the good intentions of the apostles of Nigeria's independence, which started before 1960, has manifested in syndromic suicide.

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